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ABSTRACT

There is a general agreement that participation in the political arena is not uniformly distributed across population groups. However, existing literature has failed to provide sufficient data on the efficacy of alternative models for predicting and explaining political participation among black citizens. Data reported in this study were obtained in interviews with a representative sample of adults in a predominantly black neighborhood. Interviews were conducted to determine the effect of socioeconomic status, political attitude, and community action involvement on black political participation. Two theoretical perspectives were investigated: selection theory (personal and attitudinal characteristics render individuals more likely to actively participate in political affairs) and mobilization theory (affiliation with voluntary associations or community action groups stimulates the individual to become active politically). The data indicated that both the selection and mobilization perspectives were supported. However, the selection model accounted for a larger amount of the variance in political participation of black residents. (Author/RLV)

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EFFICACY OF THE SELECTION AND MOBILIZATION THEORIES IN EXPLAINING BLACK POLITICAL PARTICIPATION*

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A B S T R A C T

Data reported in this study were obtained in interviews with a representative sample of adults in a predominately black neighborhood. Interviews were conducted with 250 black household heads to determine the effect of socioeconomic status, political attitude, and community action involvement on black political participation. Two theoretical perspectives were investigated: selection theory and mobilization theory. Through the use of partial correlation analysis, the independent effect of selection and mobilization variables were isolated. The data indicated that both the selection and mobilization perpsectives were supported. However, the selection model accounted for a larger amount of the variance in political participation of black residents.

INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement that participation in the political arena is not uniformly distributed across population groups. Numerous studies have documented ethnic and class differences in participation rates (c.f. Crum,1966; Olsen, 1970; Wright and Hyman, 1971; Verba and Nie, 1972; Williams et al. 1973; London, 1975; Bullard, 1976; London and Hearn, 1977). Existing literature has failed to provide sufficient data on the efficacy of alternative models for predicting and explaining political participation among black citizens. However, the major focus in the literature seems to be directed at presenting black-white differences in participation (c.f. Wright and Hyman, 1971; Verba and Nie, 1972; Williams et al. 1973; London, 1975).

The present research was concerned with empirically evaluating the adequacy of two alternative perspectives (i.e., selection versus mobilization) in explaining political participation among black citizens.

ISSUES SURROUNDING THE SELECTION AND MOBILIZATION PERSPECTIVES

The "selection" and "mobilization" perspectives are probably the most prevalent orientations found in the literature for explaining political participation. Various writers have suggested that personal and attitudinal characteristics (i.e., high socioeconomic status, and positive political attitude) render individuals more likely to participate actively in political affairs than their counterparts who do not possess these personal qualities (c.f. Erbe, 1964; Almond and Verba, 1965;83; Alford and Scoble, 1968; Verba et al. 1971:59 Parry, 1972: 12; London, 1975). In a sense, high socioeconomic status and the

belief that political and social change can be affected by ones efforts (alone or in concert with others) are factors which predispose individuals toward political activity (Rogers et al., 1975).

On the other hand, numerous studies have found that a substantial relationship exists between organization involvement and political participation (c.f. Lipset et al., 1956; Wright and Hyman, 1958, 1971; Erbe, 1964; Almond and Verba, 1965; Milbraith, 1965; Rose, 1967; Alford and Scoble, 1969; Matthews and Prothro, 1968; Verba and Nie, 1972; Olsen, 1972; Sallach et al., 1972; Rogers et al., 1975 London, 1975). In sum, the "mobilization" model suggests that affiliation with voluntary associations, community action groups, and issue - active organizations stimulates individuals to become active in political activities. Previous studies show somewhat mixed results regarding the independent effects of selection and mobilization variables on political participation among blacks.

Evaluation of the "selection" hypotheses required that the independent effect of socioeconomic status and political attitude be examined while controlling for the effect of organizational affiliation (e.g., community action involvement). Conversely, a test of the mobilization hypotheses called for an examination of the relationship between community action involvement to political participation while holding constant the effect of the selection variables (e.g., socioeconomic status and political attitude).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data reported in this study were obtained in interviews with a representative sample of black residents from a predominately black urban neighborhood located in the Southwestern United States. Area probability

samples were drawn from four census tracts to identify eligible households. All persons over 18 years of age in these households were enumerated, and a random sample was selected for interviewing. The total black population in 1970 in the sample area was 43,952; 300 households were selected for interviews, and of these, 250 were interviewed during the Spring of 1977.

Political participation, the dependent variable in this study, was defined in terms of voting behavior. An individual's participation in the political arena was assessed through the use of a five-item political participation scale. Respondents were asked to answer "yes" or "no" to these five questions about their prior political activity: They were asked whether they : (1) were registered voters, (2) voted in the 1972 presidential election, (3) voted in the 1976 presidential election, (4) voted in local election, (5) voted in 1976 school bond election? Scores on the five items were summed to provide a composite representing each respondent's overall political participation. Scores ranged from 0-5, with the higher scores reflecting greater political activity.

The independent variables used in this study included socioeconomic status, perceived political efficacy, perceived political efficacy of black citizen groups (selection variables), and community action involvement (mobilization variable). A socioeconomic status index was constructed by using Hollingshead's (1957) two-factor Index of Social Position (e.g., education and occupation). Respondents indicated level of education completed; this was coded into seven categories ranging from 8 years or less to post graduate work. Occupation was scored using seven occupation categories; the occupation coding scheme ranged from unskilled to professional. Each respondent's education score was multiplied by a factor of four and occupation score by a weight score of

seven. The summation of these two items represented the respondent's socioeconomic status index. The index ranged from 11 to 77, with lower scores indicating lower socioeconomic status.

The personal political efficacy variable refers to an individual's perception of his or her ability to effect change in the political arena. The personal political efficacy index consisted of four items. Each item provided respondents with the opportunity to express whether they would expect favorable or unfavorable results from various strategies of influencing public decision making processes. These strategies included writing public officials, writing agency administrators, attending public hearings, and joining groups organized to solve community problems. Answers reflecting unfavorable perceptions were coded 0, and favorable answers were coded 1. When summed the four items ranged from 0 to 4, with higher scores reflecting an expectation of favorable results from the political strategies employed.

Efficacy of black citizen groups was defined in terms of an individual's belief about his reference groups ability to produce change. This variable was measured by a five-item Likert scale. Respondents were asked to indicate their extent of agreement or disagreement to the following statements: "formation of citizen groups splinter the black community into opposing factions," "voting for elected officials is a waste of time as politicians seldom live up to promises to the black community," "black citizens have power to prevent the cutbacks in many worthy people programs," and "there is very little that blacks can do to influence public policy and decision-making." Scores ranged from 4 to 20, with low scores representing unfavorable perceptions of black citizen group efficacy.

The mobilization variable, community action involvement, was measured by a four-item scale. Respondents were asked to answer "yes" or "no" to four questions about their involvement in a number of "grassroot" community activities. They were asked whether they had ever: (1) served on a board, task force or committee responsible for community affairs, (2) participated in the deliberations of local community organizations which take stands on public issues, (3) worked in campaigns or neighborhood elections for model cities and/or community development organizations, and (4) visited community organization board meetings. The composite community action involvement score ranged from 0 to 4, with higher scores reflecting greater community involvement.

RESULTS

The political participation index used in this study was based on prior voting activity of respondents. The data in Table 1 shows that over 87 percent of the respondents interviewed were registered voters. Over three-fourths of the lower status respondents gave a similar response. This pattern continued throughout the voting activity items with lower status respondents being somewhat less involved in voting than their higher status counterparts. The activity where respondents were least likely to participate was voting in school bond elections. Again, higher status respondents (59 percent) were found to have a greater level of activity in these type elections than the lower status respondents (27 percent).

(Table 1 about here)

The data also revealed a slight increase in voting activity between the 1972 and 1976 presidential election for both social status groups; this increase was greatest for the lower status individuals.

The Selection and Mobilization Perspectives

In this study, four independent variables were hypothesized as related to political participation: socioeconomic status, perceived efficacy of black citizen groups, personal political efficacy, and community action involvement.

Socioeconomic status was found to be significantly correlated (r=.289) with political participation (See Table 2). As stated earlier, lower-status individuals tended to participate less in each level of voter activity than the higher-status respondents. However, a sizable number of lower-status respondents were active in political affairs.

(Table 2 about here)

In addition to socioeconomic status, political attitudes were significantly related to political participation. The data in Table 2 revealed that perceived efficacy of black citizen groups and personal political efficacy were correlated with political participation (r=.328 and r=.260 respectively). The finding of significant zero-order correlations of both socioeconomic status and political attitudes with political participation provide support for the "selection" model and lend some credence to its validity in explaining political behavior among blacks.

In testing the "selection" hypotheses, the mobilization variable (e.g., community action involvement) was held constant by the use of partial correlation. Data in Table 2 indicate that the correlation between socio-

economic status and political participation was reduced from .289 to .155 when controlled for community action activity. The strength of the relationship became somewhat weak (2.4 percent of the variance explained) but remained statistically significant.

Controlling on community action involvement brought about a substantial reduction in the zero-order correlation between the perceived efficacy of black citizen groups variable and political participation (reduced from .328 to .143). Similarly, the initial relationship between personal political efficacy and political participation was reduced slightly from .260 to .225. Although the applying of controls to the data reduced the initial relationship in each case, all partials continued to be statistically significant.

Of the three selection variables, personal political efficacy explained the greatest amount of variance in political participation after the effect of the mobilization variable was controlled. This finding tends to suggest that the perception of one's ability to influence political decision-making is an important element in mobilizing black residents for political activity. In sum, the results indicate that socioeconomic status and political attitudes affect political participation among blacks independent of their involvement in community related activities.

Community action involvement, the "mobilization" variable was also found to be significantly correlated (r=.364) with political participation. Table 3 presents the partial correlations between community action involvement and political participation while controlling for socioeconomic status and political attitude.

(Table 3 about here)

The first order partials were statistically significant after each control. However, the partials were somewhat lower than the zero-order correlations. Specifically, controlling for the group efficacy (perceived) variable had the largest effect on political participation (reduced from .364 to .219). The zero-order correlation between community action involvement and political participation also evidenced a reduction when the effect of social status was controlled (reduced from .364 to .276); controlling the personal political efficacy resulted in a minor reduction (from .364 to .342) in the initial relationship.

When socioeconomic status and the two political attitude variables were controlled simultaneously, there was a substantial reduction in the initial relationship between community involvement and voting behavior. In the second order partials, controlling for status and perceived group efficacy had the largest effect on participation (reduced from .364 to .158). The zero-order correlation was further diminished (from .364 to .133) when socioeconomic status, perceived group efficacy and personal political efficacy were controlled simultaneously. Although the initial correlation was reduced by nearly one half when the "selection" variables were controlled, the relationship continued to be statistically significant. These data indicate that the mobilization variable (e.g., community action involvement) was affecting participation independent of the effects of socioeconomic status and political attitudes. Thus, the data provide support for the mobilization perspective by showing the continued independent effect of community involvement on political participation.

When comparing the independent effect of community involvement on political participation with the independent effect of the three selection variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, efficacy of black citizen groups,

and personal political efficacy), the effect of community involvement on political participation was somewhat smaller. In addition, a comparison of the independent effect of each variable (e.g., selection and mobilization variables) on political participation revealed that personal political efficacy had the greatest effect on political behavior (with over 5 percent of the variance explained).

Both the selection and mobilization hypotheses were supported by the data and seem to be a useful rationale for explaining voting behavior among blacks. However, the selection model empirically accounts for a larger amount of the variance. Overall, socioeconomic status, political attitude, and community involvement accounted for a modest amount of the variance in political behavior ($r^2 = .22$). These data would suggest that other unexplained variables (not included in the present study) should be included in future studies of black political participation.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The results from the interview study indicating the effect of socioeconomic status, political attitude, and community action involvement on black political participation revealed that both the selection and mobilization perspectives were useful in explaining voting behavior among blacks. Specifically, socioeconomic status, political attitude, and community action involvement were shown to exert independent effects on political behavior. Of the research variables used in this study, personal political efficacy had the strongest independent association with political participation. In their study of political behavior, Rogers et al. (1975) found involvement to exert the greatest influence on political participation;

as their study sample consisted of white households, these findings suggest that the selection and mobilization variables have differential impact across racial and ethnic groups.

The selection variables (e.g., socioeconomic status, perceived efficacy of black citizen groups, and personal political efficacy) accounted for a larger amount of the variance in explaining voting behavior. These findings are consistent with that of several earlier studies (cf. Olsen, 1972; Verba and Nie, 1972; Sallach et al., 1972). Socioeconomic status and political attitude were found to have a positive association with political activity. The interests of lower-status blacks may not be articulated in the public domain due to their lower rate of political participation. In addition, the more an individual considers himself capable of influencing political decisions (individually and/or in concert with others), the more likely he is to become politically active. Voter apathy as exhibited through non-involvement of residents is a reflection of community powerlessness.

The selection and mobilization perspectives have different emphasis. For instance, the selection perspective suggests that an individual's personal characteristic (i.e., social class and political attitude) will have a major influence in one's political activity. That is, the interests of diverse groups will not be equally represented in the political arena. Lower socioeconomic status groups may find themselves under-represented in the decision-making process. On the other hand, the mobilization perspective focuses attention away from personal characteristics of the individual to that of group action. Activity in community and other voluntary associations is viewed as mobilizing individuals for political action.

Matthews and Prothro (1968) have posited that the structure of the communtiy in which blacks live has an effect on whether or not they engage in political activities. Our data revealed that community involvement exerted an independent effect on political behavior even after the individual's personal characteristics were controlled. These findings suggest that black citizens may become involved in the political arena for reasons other than those associated exclusively with social status or political attutude, and that involvement in community-based organizations serve as a stimulant to political activity. Community action efforts made at the grassroot level have had a positive influence on voter activity and have raised the political "consciousness" among black citizens.

In sum, both the selection and mobilization variables provide viable explanations for explaining political behavior among black residents. However, empirically the selection perspective accounted for a larger amount of variance in the political participation variable. Further study needs to be made of black political participation since the current models explain only a modest amount of the variance.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF VOTING ACTIVITY BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

VOTING ACTIVITY	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS[a] LOW (N=159)	HIGH (N=91)	TOTAL (N=250)
Registered Voter	82.4%	95.6%	87.2%
Voted in 1976 Presidential Election	75.5	87.9	80.0
Voted in 1972 Presidential Election	62.8	86.5	71.4
Voted in Local Election	65.0	81.3	71.0
Voted in 1976 Houston School Bond Election	27.8	59.1	39.0

[a]Socioeconomic status scores are based on Hollingshead's (1957) two-factor Index of Social Position; scores of 11-43 were grouped as "low", and scores 44-77 were grouped as "high".

TABLE 2. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SELECTION VARIABLES AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION CONTROLLING FOR THE MOBILIZATION VARIABLE[a]

SELECTION HYPOTHESIS	Control Variable	Partial r	Percent Variance Explained
Relationship of "Selection" Variables to Political Participation			
Socioeconomic status	(Zero-order)	.289*	8.35
	Community Action Involvement	.155*	2.40
Efficacy of black citizen Groups			
	(Zero-order)	.328*	10.75
	Community Action Involvement	.143*	2.04
Personal Political Efficacy	(Zero-order)	.260*	6.76
	Community Action Involvement	.225*	5.06

[a]The mobilization variable in this case is community action involvement.

*Correlation is significant at .05 level.

TABLE 3. PARTIAL CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THE MOBILIZATION VARIABLE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, CONTROLLING FOR SPECIFIED SELECTION VARIABLES

MOBILIZATION HYPOTHESIS	Control Variable	Partial r	Percent Variance Explained
Relationship of "mobilization" variables to Political participation			
Community Action Involvement			
(1st order)	(zero-order)	.364*	13.25
	Socioeconomic status	.276*	7.61
	Efficacy of black citizen groups	.219*	4.79
	Personal Political Efficacy	.342*	11.69
(2nd order)	Socioeconomic status & Group Efficacy	.158*	2.49
	Socioeconomic status & personal Efficacy	.259*	6.70
	Group Efficacy & personal Efficacy	.189*	3.57
(3rd order)	Socioeconomic status, efficacy of black citizen groups, and personal political efficacy	.133*	1.76

*Correlations significant at .05 level.

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